

Explosive Hazards Coordination Cell Mobile Observation Teams

By First Lieutenant Phillip M. Smith

Engineers are performing a major role in defeating the increased threat of deadly improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq. Their role in the counter-IED fight is to protect military convoys and the Iraqi population by searching for and removing IEDs from the roadways. The engineers work in teams, which are proudly known as *IED Hunters*, as they perform their duties with courage and honor at the risk of losing their own lives. According to statistics from June 2006, route clearance teams account for a significant portion of all IED finds in Iraq.

Explosive Hazards Coordination Cell

In the fall of 2005, officers and Soldiers from the 115th Engineer Battalion were mobilized as the Explosive Hazards Coordination Cell (EHCC)—formerly known as the Mine and Explosive Ordnance Information Coordination Cell (MEOICC)—to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. One of the primary missions of the EHCC is engineer route clearance.

Mobile Observation Teams

In January 2006, the EHCC organized mobile observation teams (MOTs) to help in the counter-IED fight. The MOTs monitor the progress of route clearance teams at the corps level. Their mission is to observe, collect, write, publish, and distribute route clearance information. One of the ways they do this is by observing the best tactics, techniques, and procedures of the route clearance teams and then disseminating this information to the other teams through regularly scheduled conferences. This process of collecting and distributing information captures lessons learned and empowers the teams to be more effective.

The MOTs travel throughout Iraq to meet with and observe all route clearance teams. These visits can last up to several days, depending on the number of teams per engineer company. The MOTs accompany the route clearance teams on their combat missions as specialized observers. Working with the team in this manner—and with a similar mission to



These mine-protected vehicles, the Buffalo and the RG-31, are used in the counter-IED fight.



The robotic arm of the Buffalo searches for suspected IEDs.

defeat IEDs—creates a bond between the MOTs and the route clearance teams that strengthens both groups. The MOTs learn from each team because of the difference in leadership, equipment, and geographical areas in which the teams operate. During the missions, the MOTs ask a variety of questions to the vehicle crews (driver, vehicle commander, and gunner) while they are searching for IEDs. This allows the MOTs to analyze and build on the team's strengths and correct identified weaknesses.

The MOTs share the broader perspective of route clearance operations with route clearance commanders and their teams, as well as the latest information on new equipment that is available and how it will be used. They also share their perspectives on problems pertaining to route clearance operations that are not seen at the corps level. Major issues are thereby streamlined and fixed on a mass scale to the benefit of all route clearance teams.

At the conclusion of each visit, the MOTs outbrief the company commander on his team's performance. The briefing generates an official report that is given to his chain of command. Commanders at all levels have welcomed these visits and the assessments of their teams. The MOTs' assessments then are compiled and distributed through briefings or e-mail messages to all of the route clearance community.

Route Clearance Handbook

In April 2006, the MOTs published an unclassified Route Clearance Handbook that provides guidance to route clearance teams and captures the continuity of experience

to help train new teams. The handbook is updated monthly with the latest assessments and then redistributed to the coalition forces, the combat training centers, and the United States Army Engineer School. A quote from the handbook says:

"This handbook is designed for a platoon-level route clearance team. A new patrol leader to route clearance will be able to read and understand current tactics, techniques, and procedures and how to employ route clearance vehicles."

Upcoming Products

The MOTs are scheduled to publish a Leaders Operational Handbook in the fall. They are also helping create the doctrine that will be trained to the new Iraqi army route clearance teams. Engineers continue to battle the IED fight through route clearance operations, but it has not been without the loss of great Soldiers. Engineers will continue to *Clear the Way*.



First Lieutenant Smith commands the Headquarters Detachment, 115th Engineer Battalion, and is the leading officer in charge of the MOTs. A prior enlisted Soldier, he has served almost 11 years in the Army National Guard. He is a graduate of the Engineer Officer Basic Course and will soon attend the Engineer Officer Advanced Course. He also holds a liberal arts degree from Frostburg State University, Frostburg, Maryland, with a minor in computer science. Lieutenant Smith is a New Mexico State Police Officer when not called to active duty.